

The general election in the U.K., May 2005¹

Justin Fisher
Department of Politics
Brunel University
Uxbridge
UB8 3PH

E-mail: justin.fisher@brunel.ac.uk

At the 2005 general election in the U.K., held on 5 May, the Labour Party won an historically unprecedented third victory in a row, and, correspondingly, the Conservative Party suffered its third defeat in a row. In total, 62 seats changed hands, and as all three major parties experienced both some success and some failure, the election results were curiously ambivalent. The election, itself, was called one year before it was technically necessary to do so - the United Kingdom does not have fixed terms for Westminster elections (unlike other British elections at sub-national level). This is quite normal for an incumbent party – serving the full five-year term is often seen a sign of electoral weakness and whilst Labour was in some difficulty, waiting a further year would probably not have been sensible in electoral terms. The Conservatives also had difficulties. Since the resignation of John Major after the 1997 electoral defeat, the party had had three different leaders with one, Iain Duncan-Smith, not even lasting long enough to fight a general election. Nevertheless, poll ratings suggested that the party was closing the gap somewhat on Labour. Finally, the Liberal Democrats appeared to be on the rise, championing their opposition to unpopular government policies on the Iraq war and student fees.

1. Campaign strategies

Discussion of election campaigns in Britain often distinguishes between the long and short campaigns, national and local campaigns, even the campaign before and after the closing date for postal votes.² In the 2005 election, the two campaigns were the national campaign, which was covered by the media, and the ‘real’ campaign, which targeted some 200-230 target constituencies. Moreover, in contrast to unfocussed national electioneering, the targeted constituency campaigns were centrally directed and highly focussed, with the central party organisations playing the more significant role.

This ‘local’ strategy applied particularly to the Conservative and Labour campaigns, with both presenting national messages in a local context. For example, electioneering materials frequently presented policies in terms of their effects on local constituencies rather than the country as a whole. Both parties had large communication centres, with key voters in key seats being sent direct mail (some eight mailings by the Conservatives) and contacted by telephone. A particular

innovation was contacting voters via an automated phone system, enabling the parties to collect vote intention data quickly and cheaply. The Liberal Democrats' campaign was notable for its 'decapitation strategy', targeting seats held by prominent Conservative MPs.

This local strategy also applied to other aspects of the campaigns. Most billboard advertisements were positioned in and around target seats or on busy 'travel to work' routes. Although all three major parties ran some national newspaper advertisements, greater emphasis was placed on advertising in the regional press, focussed mainly on target constituencies and adjusting the message for different audiences. Moreover, but hardly a new tactic, key party personnel toured only target seats. Other innovations included Labour's distribution of DVDs to key voters in target constituencies and the Conservatives' use of daily tracker polls in target seats.

In all, the 2005 campaigns provided further evidence that constituency campaigning is being increasingly co-ordinated and managed by professionals from national party headquarters. This local targeting even went to the point of suggesting that local contests were seen, by the major parties, as more important than the national contest. This is further confirmation of the revisionist view (Denver et al. 2003) of the significance of local campaigning, but, importantly, nationally co-ordinated constituency campaigning was dominant, not locally organised campaigning.

2. Campaign issues

Under the slogans 'Forward Not Back' and 'Vision for a Third Term', Labour's national campaign concentrated on the economy, health, and education, issue areas in which it could claim to have performed well since 1979. Later in the campaign, fearing that abstention could damage its vote, Labour also focused on boosting turnout. Despite the local targeting strategy, the analysis of constituency campaign leaflets (Fisher, 2005) reveals that law and order was the only major addition to the issues covered in Labour's broader national campaign; notably, neither the Iraq war nor Europe featured large.

In the 2001 election campaign, to secure its core vote, the Conservatives had focussed on Europe and immigration/asylum. Its 2005 platform was much broader, concentrating on crime, tax, immigration, healthcare and clean hospitals, and school discipline; and, later in the campaign, pensions. Europe was conspicuously absent from the Conservatives' frontline policies, but immigration was still prominent. The strategy appeared to be to attract floating voters who might be 'Conservative-minded'.

The immigration issue generated the most media attention. The Conservatives complained that the focus was excessive; that they were, in fact, campaigning on a wide range of issues, with immigration given no special prominence. Analysis of constituency election materials (Fisher 2005) suggests that the Conservatives' complaints were justified: immigration featured less often in Conservative constituency leaflets than law and order, health, and education. Contrary to impressions, the party was not 'always crashing in the same car' by campaigning solely on immigration. It appealed on a broad front, but appears to have been hampered by the media's focus on its immigration stance.

The Liberal Democrats campaigned nationally on five principal issues: abolition of student tuition fees, free personal health care for the elderly, scrapping the Council Tax, the Iraq war, and the environment — all issues where polling suggested the party was ahead. The local campaign analysis presents a slightly different picture, however (Fisher, 2005). Like the two major parties, the Liberal Democrats at the local level placed a great deal of emphasis on law and order. And, like Labour, Europe was almost completely ignored.

The contents of local campaign leaflets are also worth noting.³ First, their tone varied, with Labour's the most positive, the Conservative's roughly evenly balanced between positive and negative, and the Liberal Democrat's rather more positive than negative. Secondly, over 40% of the leaflets distributed by the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats engaged in significant levels of personal attack on other politicians. Labour engaged in fewer personal attacks, but this may reflect campaigning differences between incumbents and challengers. Thirdly, all parties featured significant local messages in a majority of constituencies. However, the Conservatives were most given to promoting local concerns; the Liberal Democrats

the least. The marginality of constituencies also mattered; all three major parties, including Labour, campaigned more negatively in marginal seats. This was particularly true of the Liberal Democrats; in the vast majority of marginal seats, their leaflets featured personal attacks, many of them on the Prime Minister. Marginality also boosted the extent of local content in Conservative and Liberal Democrat constituency campaigns; for Labour there was no such pattern.

Analysis of the local campaigns dispels three myths about the 2005 general election. One: the Conservative Party was concerned not only with immigration; it campaigned rather more on other issues. Two: whilst the Liberal Democrats have often presented themselves as more principled than Labour and the Conservatives, it engaged in personal attacks as much as the Conservatives and especially in marginal seats. Three: it was the Conservatives, not the Liberal Democrats, who campaigned most on local issues.

3. Election results

The results of the election are detailed in Table 1. Turnout at the election was 61.4% - 2% higher than in 2001, but still historically low, being the second lowest turnout since 1918.

< Table 1 about here >

On election night, Labour's celebrations were distinctly muted, despite its comfortable overall majority (65 seats) and winning a third term. For a party whose electoral performance in post-war elections could be described as patchy at best, winning three full terms in a row was a considerable achievement. Moreover, Labour's majority at the 2005 election looks the poorer because its majorities in 1997 and 2001 were outstanding. Even so, there were downsides to Labour's victory.

First, based on the 'notional' 2001 results,⁴ Labour lost some 47 seats — and lost them to different parties: the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats, and the Scottish National Party, as well as one-off defeats to the Respect party, and to an Independent candidate. Secondly, even where Labour held on to seats, majorities were reduced. There are now 88 Labour seats with a majority of less than 10%, compared with 61 following the 2001 election. Hence, seats not targeted in 2005 because considered

safe will need to be targeted at the next election, thereby stretching resources. As Denver et al (2002) show, the electoral payoffs are smaller the larger the number of seats parties target. Thirdly, Labour's overall national vote share fell significantly, from 40.7% in to 35.2%. This was a record low for a winning party, and meant that only 21.6% of the eligible electorate voted Labour (also a record for a winning party). Cautions about over-interpreting victories in U.K. elections have been made elsewhere (e.g., see Cowley et al., 1998), but bear in mind that even Labour's 1997 vote share was smaller than it had achieved in the five elections 1945-1966. Moreover, in 1997, Labour commanded only 30.8% of the support of the eligible electorate – a figure bettered by the Conservatives in three of their election victories 1979-1992.

The Conservative Party, despite its third defeat in a row, emerged with some cheer. They gained a reasonable number of seats (36), lost only one 'big name' (despite the Liberal Democrats' 'decapitation strategy'), and wrested seats from both Labour and the Liberal Democrats. They became the strongest party in England in terms of vote share (35.7%), gained seats in Scotland and Wales, and largely resisted electoral advances by the Liberal Democrats. Thus, talk of a serious Conservative challenge in the near future appears to have some credibility.

From another perspective, the Conservative's performance was unimpressive. In terms of vote share, the party's improvement on 2001 was only 0.7%; in terms of seats, it bettered only its position in 1997 and 2001. Moreover, the party's vote share fell in some regions (North East, North West, Yorkshire, Humberside, and East and West Midlands), suggesting the party is hardly revitalised in swathes of England. In short, the Conservative Party averted an electoral disaster and remains the major opposition party, but little more.

The Liberal Democrats' high hopes going into the election, largely due to Labour's declining popularity and the Conservative's weak recovery, also came to little. Its only real successes were winning 12 seats from Labour and three from the Conservatives. Otherwise, the Liberal Democrats share of the vote increased by a modest 3.7 percentage points; the Conservatives took five of their seats; and, where Conservatives held their seats, they frequently turned slim majorities into more

comfortable ones. Clearly, the ‘decapitation strategy’ was an abject failure; and neither the Liberal Democrats’ opposition to the Iraq war nor university fees seemed to draw significant support to it. Albeit that the Liberal Democrats emerged from the election with an additional 11 seats, the party failed to capitalise on the potential for greater advance.

The national parties (Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National Party) experienced mixed fortunes. Overall, Plaid Cymru’s vote share fell by 1.7 percentage points in Wales; and it lost one seat to the Liberal Democrats (Ceredigion). The Scottish National Party also lost votes: 2.4 percentage points on its 2001 vote share – its poorest showing since 1987. But it won two seats from Labour, taking the SNP’s total to six (jointly with 1997, its best performance since its 1974 highpoint).

There were also some successes for independent candidates and minor parties. The Independent Kidderminster Hospital Health Concern candidate retained the Wyre Forest seat won in 2001; the Independent candidate in Blaenau Gwent won the seat from Labour,⁵ and the Respect candidate, former Labour MP, George Galloway, won the seat of Bethnal Green and Bow – also from Labour. The UK Independence Party put up some 496 candidates (up from 428 in 2001) and the British National Party some 119 (up from 33 in 2001). Where it had candidates standing, the British National Party polled on average 4.3%, the Greens 3.4%, and the UK Independence Party 2.8%. In all, the minor parties put in stronger performances than previously, suggesting they are likely to remain electoral players, especially whilst they continue to achieve some success in local, devolved, and European elections.

In Northern Ireland, the emerging dominance of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Fein continued. The DUP gained four seats from the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) giving it nine of the 18 Westminster seats in Northern Ireland. Sinn Fein gained one seat from the Social and Democratic Labour Party (SDLP), making it the second largest party with five seats. The SDLP gained one seat from the UUP. Thus, the UUP, once dominant in Northern Irish politics, was left with only one seat; even the UUP’s leader, David Trimble, lost his seat. This was the UUP’s worst ever general election performance, losing 9 percentage points of its Northern Irish vote in 2001.

4. Outcomes

Labour's third successive election victory, led to revived discussion, originating in the Conservative Party's fourth electoral consecutive victory in 1992, that Britain had, in effect, become an elected 'one-party state' (eg. Margetts and Smyth, 1994). Regardless of whether this was justified, either now, or in 1992, the slim margin of Labour's victory in terms of vote share has led to an increased focus on the electoral systems used for general elections

The vote:seats (dis)proportionality following several British general elections have given rise to demands for electoral reform. After the 2005 election, much attention focussed on the fact that only one in five of the electorate actually voted Labour — a mischievous argument, since the figure was depressed by low turnout. Advocates of electoral reform claim that the non-representativeness associated with the 'first-past-the-post' electoral system is getting worse: ever fewer people support the winning party; the Effective Number of Electoral Parties and the Effective Number of Parliamentary Parties⁶ are rising, confirming the emergence of multi-party politics to which a first-past-the-post system is less well-suited.

On the other hand, in terms of the electoral system's performance, the outcome of the 2005 election was not very different from earlier elections. In fact, the DV score (which measures deviation from proportionality, in terms of the percentage share of votes and percentage share of seats) actually fell, with disproportionality barely different from 2001. Thus, the 2005 results are unlikely to add further ammunition to the reformers' case: those who favoured reform before are likely to favour it still; for those who did not, there was little about the 2005 election to make for a change of mind. The key question is probably whether the Conservative Party will change its position, not through conversion to proportionality but simply self-interest. The party flirted with electoral reform whilst out of power in the 1970s; perhaps three election defeats may lead it to consider reform once more.

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Table 1
Results of UK general election, 5 May 2005

	Votes	Vote Share (%)	Change in Vote Share (%)*	Seats	Change in Seats
Conservative	8,784,915	32.4	+0.7	198	+33
Labour	9,552,436	35.2	-5.5	355	-47
Liberal Democrat	5,985,454	22.0	+3.7	62	+11
Plaid Cymru	174,838	0.6	-0.1	3	-1
Scottish Nationalist Party	412,267	1.5	-0.3	6	+2
UK Independence Party	605,973	2.2	+0.7	0	0
Green	283,414	1.0	+0.4	0	0
British National Party	192,745	0.7	+0.5	0	0
Democratic Unionist Party	241,856	0.9	+0.2	9	+4
Sinn Fein	174,530	0.6	-0.1	5	+1
Ulster Unionist Party	127,414	0.5	-0.3	1	-5
Social Democratic & Labour Party	125,626	0.5	-0.1	3	0
Others/Speaker	487,042	1.8	-0.1	4	+2
Total	27,148,510	100.0		646	

Source: Election 2005: Turnout (Electoral Commission, 2005)

Notes: Table includes results for the South Staffordshire constituency, postponed to 23rd June following the death of a candidate. Labour and the Liberal Democrats only contest seats in Great Britain (England, Scotland, and Wales); Plaid Cymru only contests seats in Wales; the Scottish Nationalist Party only contests seats in Scotland; the Democratic Unionist Party, Sinn Fein, Ulster Unionist Party, and Social Democratic and Labour Party only contest seats in Northern Ireland.

* Notional scores; see Footnote 4.

Notes

¹ I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Philip Cowley and Colin Rallings in gathering together some of the information in this note.

² Postal voting on demand was introduced prior to the 2001 General Election.

³ For a detailed analysis of constituency-level campaign literature, see Fisher 2005.

⁴ One effect of Scottish devolution was a reduction in the number of Westminster

seats in Scotland from 72 to 59. Hence, calculations about seat losses and gains as they relate to Scotland, and thus Great Britain, are based on ‘notional’ results for the 2001 election; that is, calculated as if the 2001 election was fought on the basis of the 646 constituencies contested in 2005 rather than the 659 contested in 2001.

See, for example, General Election 2005, House of Commons Research Paper 05/33

⁵ The candidate was a former Labour member of the Welsh Assembly who stood in protest at the decision of the Labour Party to impose an all-women candidate shortlist to succeed the retiring MP.

⁶ The ENEP Index was 2.46 in 1970, rising to 3.47 in 2005 — its highest in the post-1945 period. The 2005 ENPP score was 2.44 — again, post-war high.